

**PRESSURE BUILDINGS AND BLACKOUTS**

by

Mark West

**September 26-October 31, 1992****Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 12-6 pm****Opening Reception: September 26, Saturday, 6-8pm**

Pressure Buildings and Blackouts is an installation/exhibition by Mark West. Pressure Buildings, a site-specific installation of West's system of forming concrete by using flexible and permeable fabrics, will be constructed within the exhibition space and project out onto the facade of Storefront through a series of openings. The shape of Storefront itself is analogous to the rigid form works that traditionally shape concrete, from which West's concrete will ooze-out into a free form on the facade. Blackouts, a series of drawings made by erasing and blackening collaged images, will be exhibited inside. The Intents of project are to remove the frameworks that restrict physical formation [Pressure Buildings] and visual observation [Blackouts], and to engage art, architecture and technology simultaneously.

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**Pressure Buildings**

For the past four years, Mark West has developed a method of forming concrete by using a fabric tension membrane in place of the traditional plywood forms. Using high strength industrial fabrics that are both flexible and permeable, he has been able to produce the forms that retain the original liquid state of concrete. The result are entirely new territory of forms for architecture and a potential to 'soften' the rigidity of constructed environments

The key to his method is the fact that liquid is most efficiently contained by a tension membrane (as opposed to the wooden boxes used in traditional formwork technology). In the formwork made of fabrics, the weight of concrete deflects in accordance with gravity to naturally create the exact tensile for a highly efficient and resilient, structure. It is worth noting that the structure in traditional rigid wooden formwork serves solely to inhibit the deflection of these forms under the hydrostatic pressure of the wet concrete. A high price is thus inevitably paid when liquid concrete is forced into the planar geometry of these wooden containers.

With water-permeable fabric membrane the water-cement ratio of the placed concrete is reduced, thus producing a stronger member than from using wood forms (which tend to retain more water than is desirable). The fabric also ensures a very fine finish to the concrete surface because the small air bubbles that usually appear on the surface of concrete structure are, along with the excess mixing water, forced



out through the membrane. As a result, a very high quality finish can be achieved almost as a matter of course by using certain fabrics.

The use of fabric lets gravity to shape concrete, more specifically the dead load of material itself. Fabric lets the material to find its own way, and allows the liquid nature of 'wet' concrete to express itself in the final architectural form. These experiments by Mark West foresees architecture whose geometric determinants are expanded to include those dictated by random events, and by so called chaotic form and geometry.

### **Blackouts**

Blackouts are a series of drawings by erasing. West first starts with collages made of found photographs and drawings and then redraws them by blackening them with graphite. The graphite works over the original images beyond their recognition, and blends and shadows them into a field of images and shapes bound to each other almost endlessly.

But Blackouts are more than simply erasing and blending of images. They erase the authority of perspective system in the delineation and representation of the world and its images, and even by-passes the system of multi-foci that offers separate views simultaneously. Suggested here is the use of indeterminacy and blindness as a way of seeing things, and that the blindness caused by removing light shone upon the objects--the lighting principle of the perspective system that illuminates all objects visible or to be viewed from a single point--may bring forth object's own presence and light, and create further seeing in the darkness through their transparency. The question raised here is does the traditional system of illuminating and seeing really shows everything (The ceramic pottery of Kyoro period in Korea were made to be seen in darkness or under the moon).

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Blackouts no longer questions the finding of things that are not yet seen, but seeing things in a different way. With the visible proliferated more than our capacity to see, to see now begins with what not to see, therefore the blindness, and to see more than what is visible requires their transparency. Being erased in Blackouts are not the objects but the system, reducing its lines and structure of sight into a field of transparency and mutation. With the structure of authority now invisible and the center of perspective removed, objects now overlap and fuse into each other into a field of independence and interdependence. Dead is the center of vision, replaced by the periphery of vision.

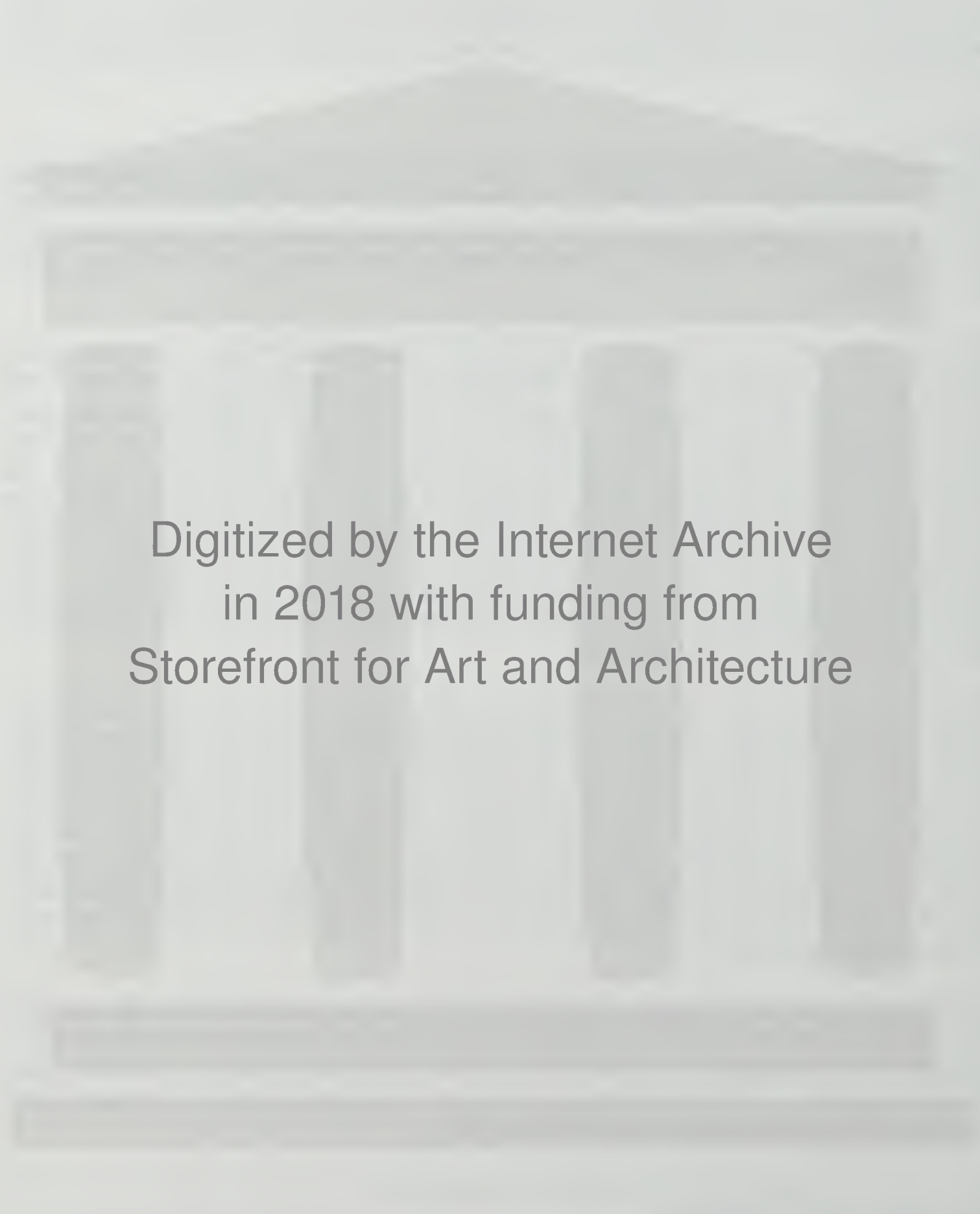
One concrete yet free (Pressure Buildings) and the other visual yet blind (Blackouts), they together question traditional rigidity in the making of the forms and seeing of the world. Both are projects to explore more than to oppose, and to add rather than simply denounce. The link between the two is to escape the mold of physical and visual, and to see and make in dark with vagrancy.

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## BLACKOUTS

In his story by the same name, Jorge Luis Borges speaks of "the Aleph." It is described simply as "...one of the points in space that contains all other points...the only place on Earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear without any confusion or blending."

Borges' attraction to the "Aleph" is an attraction to the possibilities of vision itself. The fact that Borges himself was blind only adds to the poignance of the tale. Indeed, the Aleph happens to be located in the frightening darkness of a friend's cellar.

But the blindness of Borges recedes into a metaphor when we consider the importance placed upon vision in our history. Our interest in seeing all things clearly has placed considerable emphasis upon the eye itself, the most acute of the senses. At the beginning of the modern era, Descartes used the eye as the mechanism through which the world was given over to thought. The precision of the eye was of great interest to him and inspired his speculations on geometry as the ideal of the point at which eye and mind meet the world. This point of convergence was also the point through which the infinitude of things was compressed, the point that contains all "other points." The results of such efforts have come to us in the form of the theory and technique of perspective. This form of representation has gradually become the dominant mode in our culture and continues its proliferation in the form of photography, film, and now video.



The advance of perspective, however, has not been continuous. In the realm of art, other means of representation have been explored to counter (and possibly expand) the limits of the technique of perspective. For as much as the point is an opening, it is also a limit, just one of all possible views of the horizon.

In Cubism, the world is presented upon a plane rather than within a point. The dimensions of an object in space are constructed from this plane by cutting and rotating pieces of the plane out of its former context. In Cubism the world is flat, thereby making its surfaces available for manipulation. It is this very gathering of disparate surfaces or images that is lacking in perspective which again finds itself tied to the dominance of the single point.

In our time we have seen attempts to combine the cut-ups of Cubism with the perspective of the photograph in the technique of photo-montage. This has come about due to the fact that many of our images of the world today are delivered to us by way of photographic media. Each photograph represents not only a location in space but also a point in time.

Photographs are evidence of a presence. They signify that time has passed in the implication of a before and after frozen in the still motion of the picture. It is this temporal gloss that painting and collage, as deliberate constructions, cannot possess. The photograph is an index, a photo-synthetic piece of evidence of time and space. The photo-montage gathers different times and spaces and sets them against each other. But despite the skill of many of its practitioners, the photo-montage remains flat, the surface does not dissolve or open up. This is due in part of the presence of



the sharp, cut edges that constantly reiterate the original flat surface of the image.

It is this "cut" that Mark West erases in his "Blackouts", the next development in this evolving tradition of visual representation. As he indicates in his written description of the work, the Blackouts begin as photo-montages which are the "blacked-out" or drawn over with graphite. The choice of the medium of erasure is significant for graphite possesses a continuous gradient of tone from the lightest of greys (or light-blacks) to black itself. This enables Mr. West to match any tone in the photograph and thereby bind it to the graphite. This disruption of the image is fluid, dissolving into a tone of graphite which permits a stretching and binding with an adjacent image. The fluidity of the graphite has no edges. Like a video image, all is composed of a minute toned grain that encourages the continuity rather than the dis-continuity of a surface in depth. In earlier works the tonality of the graphite is expressed in continuous layers of transparency through which forms emerge and disappear. In such a way all "things" in the blackouts possess a quiddity that enables them to slide between object and space. The blackness in the image is a tangible and seething substance out of which can bubble up any possible form. In the later works the "lubricating" aspects of graphite (Mr. West points out that graphite is used as an industrial lubricant) are explored in sexual and biological metaphors. If there is a primal substance in Mr. West's universe, it certainly would be an ooze rather than a solid or fire. The infinitude resolves itself in the substance of matter rather than the emptiness of a void. It is the very opposite of the pure spatium of Descartes, that abstracted continuity that enables the projection of the logic of vision and



reason. Here we find ourselves in a viscous medium of sight, inside a black eyeball of space, a place where the infinitude of things exists without brilliance—the negative Aleph of Borges represented in a dull, seamy glow.

In discussing his work, Mr. West speaks of drawing through erasure, working over an image to the limit of unrecognizability. The opposition to the tradition of "delineation" or rational construction could not be stronger. Just as perspective isolates and separates an object from its context, the blackout submerges the object into a medium with no horizon. One is reminded here of paintings of the Surrealists Matta and Tanguay. But the blackouts of West refuse to be limited by a singular reduction to a formal substance. They are, on the other hand, virtual explosions of formal difference, a medium where all forms co-exist in a dark adjacency.

The solubility of such a vision is symbolic of the medium through which the many polarities in our knowledge are being mediated. It is the dark, interstitial realm of techno-bio synapses, the cybernetic that connects the body with autonomous machines. Our ambivalence with such a turn is manifested in the nightmarish quality of the images, yet we are fascinated by their allure, the proliferation of forms that draw out of us our latent desires. Just as the Aleph represented Borges' desire for vision, the blackouts are our desire not to see, a desire to circulate our vision into the medium of our body so that it emerges, stained in the waters of our forgetfulness.



## FORMWORK

The formwork studies of Mark West can be understood in the context of his continuing questioning of the received knowledge of architecture and its representation.

As was discussed in the previous section on the Blackouts series, much of this knowledge is informed by the rational, and now technological traditions that have characterized the modern age, traditions seek to make all things clear and accessible through the point of reason.

In architecture the tradition manifests itself in a form of representation that demands that a building be conceived as part of a universally transmissible system of measure (mathematics) that can govern all aspects of the building process. This is the so called "working drawing", the document that orders the construction through the geometry, thereby determining the measure of the work. The problem with this manner of drawing is that it demands that the architect conceive of a building through mathematics and technology rather than through practices of building craft. The separation between building and representation has a slow, but distinct development in the modern period, but has now split architecture into two distinct practices. It could be said that the architect can no longer claim to be the head of the "whole art of building."

Mark West directly challenges this state of affairs by investigating the possibilities of building formwork itself as a site of inquiry for the architect. This is made possible through the remarkable observation, or



discovery, that flexible spandex cloth can be used to form concrete. Since the cloth is such a thin membrane, it registers all the loads that are acting upon it. The resulting form thereby becomes the record of its own making. The liquidity of the concrete receives any mark or pressure placed upon it. Current formwork practice in the building industry, on the other hand, has that are reduced concrete to a codified and predictable system of given forms inevitably Euclidean in nature. The flexible formwork system, on the other hand, invites idiosyncratic articulation. In its embrace concrete is understood to be the heavy liquid that it is. The forming of the liquid, through the restraining resistance of ropes and fabric, is the mark of the architect. Designing literally becomes a spontaneous form-making, the binding of the ropes replacing the delineation of drawing.

There is a immediacy to the formwork of Mark West. We sense the moment of the pour, the straining of the resistance, a moment frozen in time like the figures of the bodies turned to stone in Pompei.

It is also remarkable that the forms found in the blackouts actually anticipate those found in the concrete pours. Here the liquidity of drawings is found literally built in the solidity of concrete. The correspondence between the two is startling and points to the possibility that this manner of making can truly resonate between our bodies and the world. What binds the two ways of working together is their mutual engagement with intuitive ways of working—the absent gesture which cannot be found in the deductive methods of Euclidean geometry. Just as the architect can now draw by erasing, the architect can now build by



tying and binding, the darkened surfaces of the blackouts emerging from the imprints of the absent formwork on the concrete.

Another bridge between the two bodies of work lies in the realm of the obsession with techniques, be it the impossible patience of the graphite applications or the virtuosity of knot tying. Here we have a curious blend of the transcendent finesse of a primitive marking with the accelerated images of contemporary world beat techno-poetics. There is no desire to absent the body in virtual constructions, to make the hand invisible. No, this work is about the celebration of the eye-hand connection, refining the harmonies so that they reverberate through the body and all that it sees and touches. As dark as the work may seem, it is about access, not isolation.



What is this vision that attempts to bind all things in its material embrace?  
What is this medium that wavers between the opposition of mind and  
body? What is this way of working that opens up the intuitive and  
inclusive play of forms through the erasure of for-getting?

The openings provided in this work are compelling and provocative.  
Before it we are in the hysterical presence of something revealed. We are  
seduced into looking and touching and we must ask ourselves why.



## CONTENTS OF THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition of the work of Mark West will include drawings, photographs, models, and a full scale public (sculptural/architectural) installation.

The drawings are from several projects (from 1984 to 1991), many of which have never been shown publicly before. Some of these are from architectural competitions, and others are from various fictional projects that have accompanied Mr. West's building projects over the years.

The manner in which these drawings have informed his building raises many interesting questions regarding the nature of architectural drawings as an investigatory and speculative tool. Mr. West's drawings are not "technical drawings," however they have another form of technical precision and clarity that has directly informed his architectural work.

The photographs included in this exhibition will present a record of several different projects, some built in model form, and others built at full scale.

The Public Installation included in this exhibition will take the form of a new facade construction over the existing Storefront gallery's exterior (on Kenmare St. in Manhattan). This facade will be built using some of the fabric formwork techniques illustrated in the accompanying slides. This installation will not only be a public introduction to a new kind of concrete architecture, but a public sculpture as well. This installation is intended to offer proof that art and architecture can not only coexist, but can be inseparable and simultaneous -- which is what this exhibition of Mr. West's work is all about.



Jan. 18, 1992

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Dear K&S,

Here is a reworked text for the "art" grant folks. Tell me what you think.

slides to follow . . .

Regards,

Mark

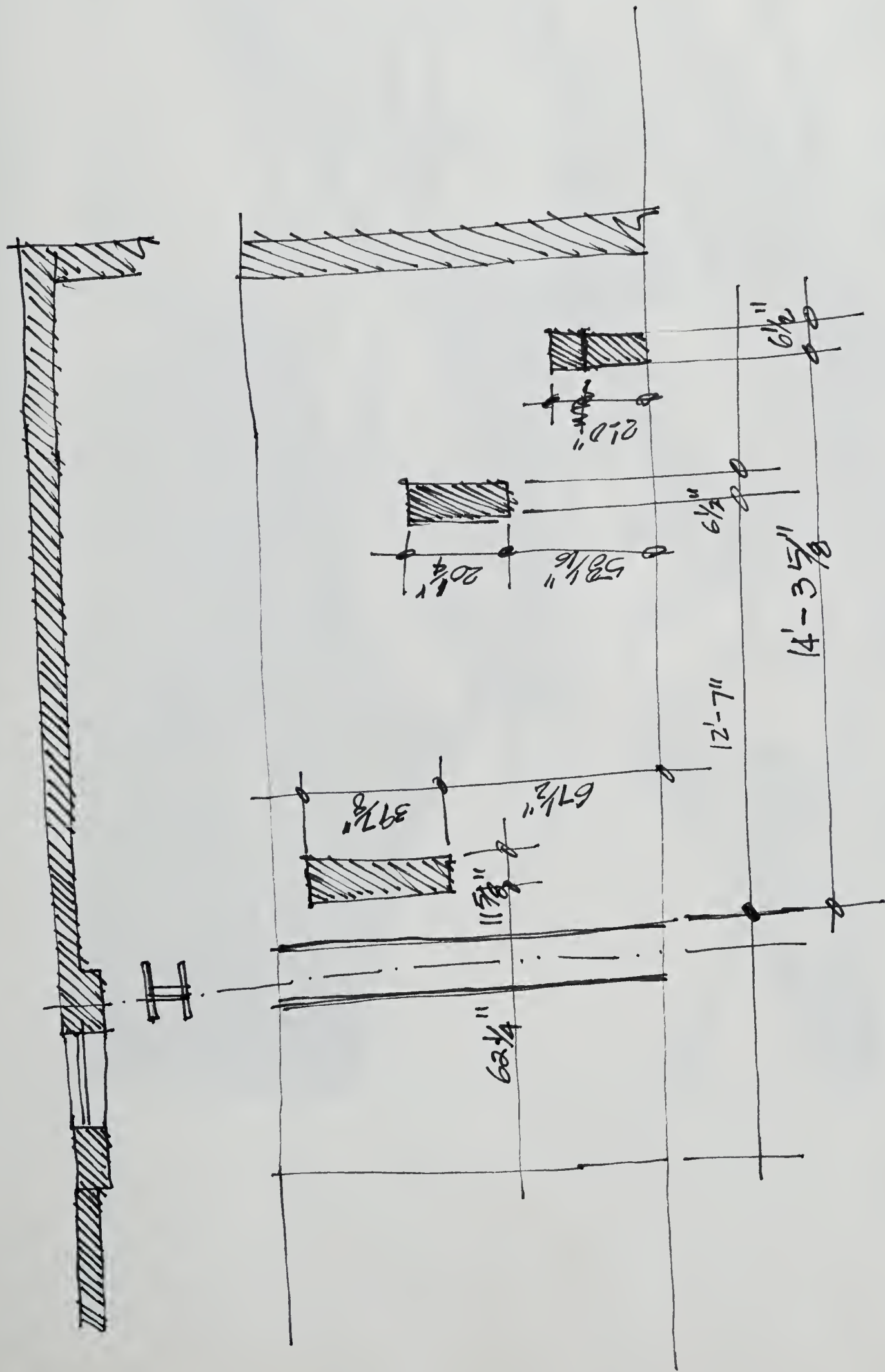
TITLE Storefront respectfully requests support for an exhibition of architectural projects by Mark West. Mr. West is an architectural researcher, artist and educator who has devoted his work over the past decade to erasing the boundaries which have evolved between art and architecture. Each of the various methods and media represented in this work, from speculative drawings to powerful new building techniques that give sculptural form to reinforced concrete, represent a series of deceptively simple devices and techniques for transforming existing and mundane "phenotypes" of our material landscape into other (previously unforeseen) possibilities (a kind of "recombinant genetics" of our late twentieth century material world). This work is noteworthy for how a great freedom of imagination is matched by the invention of new construction methods that make this freedom possible in the real world. His drawings produce a kind of (science?) fictional tale of a world in constant (and unexpected) change, while the building projects envision an architecture as multifarious as nature, an architecture where structure is indistinguishable from sculpture. The simplicity of his construction techniques make the (fictional) drawings all the more intriguing for the possible realities they may actually contain. The exhibition will include drawings, models, photographs, and a full scale construction introducing, for the first time in public, the use of some of these ground breaking new techniques.







$$\begin{array}{r} 1'-8\frac{5}{8}'' \\ 12'-7'' \\ \hline 14'-3\frac{5}{8}'' \end{array}$$



Dwg. 2 of 2.







